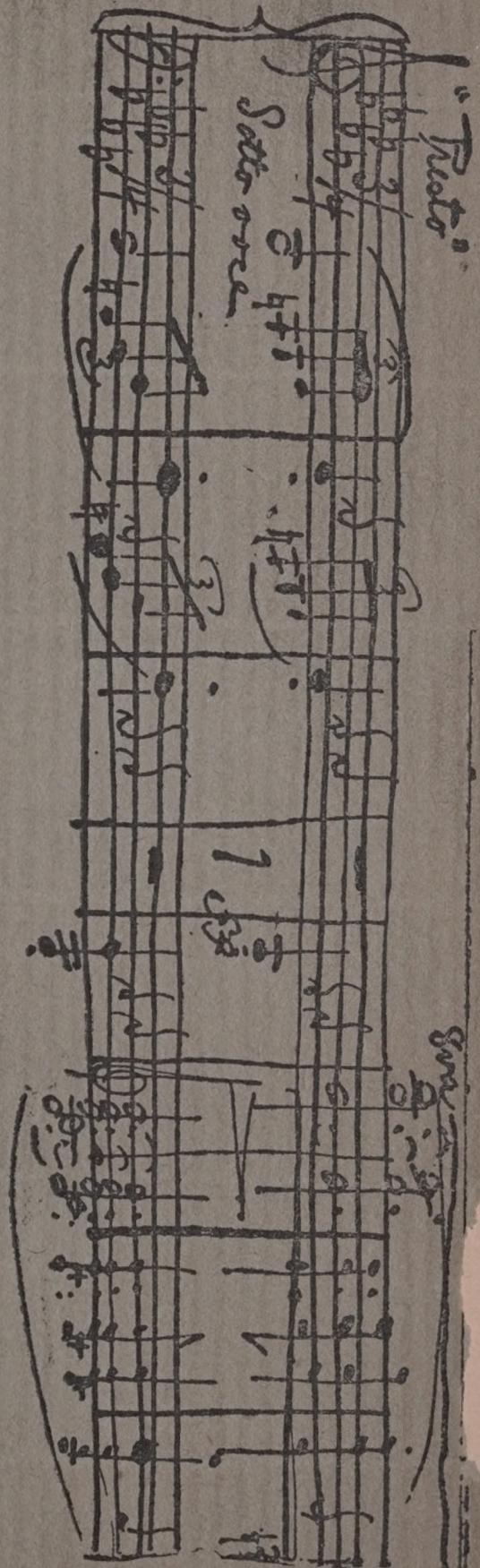


St. Mark
Schengen.
Bb Minor







THE
SCHERZO IN B-FLAT MINOR.

BY
D. HIGBEE,

Author of "In 'God's Country.' "

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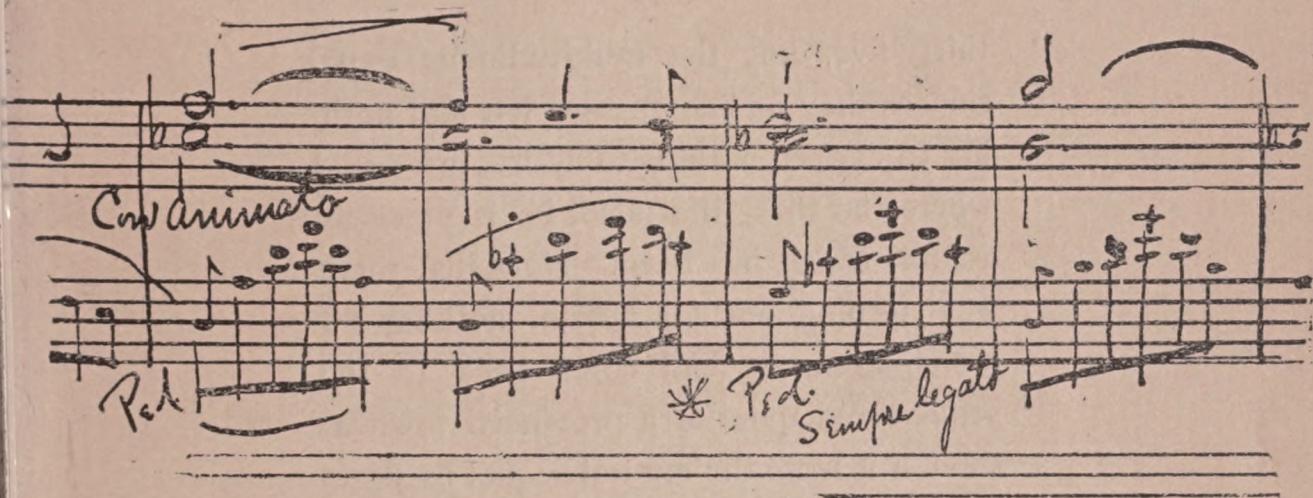
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“O world! so few the years we live,
Would that the life which thou dost give
Were life indeed!”

It was spring, and the skies above his native town were palely blue, with here and there hints of warm gray, when Felix returned from wandering in many lands, with the depression of spirit born of failure and the heart-weariness that comes of the love of many women.

He was neither young nor old. The years he had lived numbered perhaps

thirty-five, but the multitudinous experiences they had compassed left him nothing to expect, nothing to desire, in a world where the thing that shall be is precisely as that which has been. Now that there was nothing left for action, nothing for anticipation, he had come back to the sequestered quiet of a provincial town as though it were the natural sequel to years spent in endeavor and crowned with disappointment.

He had the poetic temperament, the volcanic fire that keeps a perpetual tumult at the core long after the surface indications point to extinction. He once thought he had a message to convey to his race, but his repeated and ill-requited stammerings had at last convinced him that the world either did not need it, or was not prepared to receive it, and he had finally closed the temple through which the oracle might have been delivered.

As he sauntered idly along the street, in the pale glow of the early spring, he

fell to ruminating on the strange fate of the soul that is doomed to speak a language unknown to the race with which it is compelled to herd; doomed to yearn with something of divine tenderness toward a humanity that is forever remote, forever indifferent to that yearning, and he wondered, now that he was no longer active, at the blind persistence, the insane hope that had led him from point to point of his career, in the expectation of somewhere meeting the soul that should answer to his own; that to-morrow the world, which was deaf to-day, would hear and understand.

The sun was warm, and the trees, whose buds were beginning to burst, were thrown against the sky in fine sprangles of tender green or dull, purplish red; the delicate tendrils of the budding Virginia creeper wrought etchings of exquisite grace upon the red brick or dark stone walls of the houses, and in the door-yards along the street points of vivid color showed where

some indiscreet shrub was flinging its blossoms to the breeze, heedless of the frosts that were to come later. The feverish eagerness that had driven Felix forth to search the world for sympathy and appreciation had subsided into a settled gloom, and the seductive voices and subdued tints of a perfect spring day made no impression on him. His eyes were turned inward, and upon his face rested the intangible shadow of a life stripped of incentive.

Why should we care, he mused, for these dull ears? Why yearn over these benighted groundlings? Why should the individual who has scaled the dizzy heights of understanding stand shivering in the rare atmosphere of his native blue through mere lack of companionship? Why was not the exaltation sufficient in itself? Why should the heightened sensibility that opens one's nature to all that is noble and inspiring only serve to accent the loneliness, intensify the strenuous reaching out

for something to which the heart may sing its joy? When one has discovered a pearl of great price, it were surely the rankest folly to attempt to hang it in the nose of a beast totally ignorant of its value. And yet, was not this precisely what all those messengers of the gods, from Homer down, had sought to do?

On the corner, half a block distant, was a conservatory of music, whose harsh dis cords grew more clamorous as he approached. The windows were all open and innumerable instruments of various kinds were fretting the balmy air with their distracting din. The brazen stuttering of a cornet answered the inharmonious screech ings of a dozen violins; the shrill piping of a piccolo cut into the half-hearted, inconsequential toot, toot of a flute that was flat and the mocking twang of a banjo pene trated the confusion of a score of pianos all going in different keys. The rasping noises of the place, pierced by the voice of the clown of instruments, furnished food

for cynical reflections, and Felix had begun to compare it with the world in which he lived, when a melodious strain separated itself from the aching discord; a strain so full of exquisite pathos that the deafening confusion seemed to dissolve under its influence, and for a moment he heard nothing else. He recognized it as a fragment of Chopin's scherzo in B-flat minor, and it seemed to bring with it a sudden peace. Something prompted him to turn his introspective gaze upon the world without, and, as he did so, it encountered the figure of a woman coming toward him. The rhythmic grace of her carriage brought into his mind those lines of Shelley :

* * * "An antelope
In the suspended impulse of its lightness
Were less ethereally light," * * *

and the melody seemed to fit itself to the easy, undulating movement with which she glided along under the trees. He remembered afterward that their eyes met as the strain swelled into the crescendo,

and that hers mirrored the limpid blue of the spring sky ; also that, though the face was unfamiliar, the eyes beamed upon him with a joyous recognition in which there was no reserve, and yet no hint of coquetry ; only the glad surprise of one who meets a valued friend after long separation. The thought came to him that it was, perhaps, some one who had known him before he went away ; some little girl he had left in short dresses, grown to womanhood, who recognized him, though he did not remember her. Something of the same glad anticipation shone in his own face ; he expected her to speak as she passed, but she did not, and Felix was conscious of a feeling very near to disappointment. He stopped on the corner under the pretense of waiting for a car, and stood watching her as she walked away with that splendid, rhythmic movement, the finely penciled shadows of the trees slipping over her as she went and the melody clinging to her, adjusting itself to her step. Then

the discord closed over the strain like a tempestuous sea, and the girl, turning the corner, passed out of sight.

Felix went on his way and was soon beyond the din of the conservatory, but the melody followed him. When he ceased humming it, it went on beating through his brain like the cry of one caught in the toils of fate. Hitherto he had not cared for this particular scherzo, because it seemed to him to have been written for the masses. Everybody played it, everybody liked it, and it had become trite and wearisome by repetition. It appealed to him now with a new significance. What he heard in it was that yearning note of condescension, that cry of the creature aloft upon the pinnacle of genius; alone, like St. Simeon on his column, where the mighty discord of the elements beat unceasingly; the pleading of a famished soul whose ear caught faintly the meaningless murmur of the rabble at that altitude to which no voice of human sympathy might

ascend. It was the reaching down of the poet to the people, the stooping of the god in man to that which is less divine.

“And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me.” It was the echo of that cry uttered long ago by the blue waters of Galilee. It was this that made its pathos irresistible.

The sudden peace that had fallen upon him departed as suddenly and the old tumult began again. He went back to the habitation he had made for himself in this town where all that was once close and familiar was now remote and strange. He threw himself into a chair in a room that was full of the evidences of failure. Their proximity pierced him with intolerable pain, but he kept them always near him, lest in some moment of mounting courage he should be betrayed by the fool’s gold of hope into further effort. Here were the songs from which the heedless ears of men had turned with indifference, even with derision; the verses they would not

read, the pictures in which they could see no good thing. And so long as these were with him, the creative power that even now stirred in him at times could be drugged into quiescence.

He went to the piano and began to play the scherzo. The notes conjured before him the face he had met in the street and the cup of peace he had tasted at that moment was again at his lips. As he recalled the joyous look of recognition that greeted him and the sudden effect of the melody that seemed to float out of hearing with the presence that had so moved him, he indulged a curious fancy that in that instant an invisible union had been consummated, sanctioned by the benediction of a poet who, like himself, had suffered many things. But he soon tired of the piano ; he tired of everything now because there was no incentive anywhere, and, going back to his seat, he reached for the volume of Shelley that lay on the window-shelf, and turned idly to "Epipsychedion." It

was the poem of all poems that was capable of giving him the most genuine and lasting pleasure. Compared to this exquisite love-lyric the fervid outpourings of all other poets on the subject seemed either colorless and wan, or of the earth, extremely earthy. It had ever been to him the one sublime achievement of expression, in which the honey of the language had been, drop by drop, distilled and imprisoned. It was the one poem that, even in his moments of confidence, had been wont to reduce him to despair by the mere contemplation of its perfection, in whose triune harmony the music of thought, word, and meter is so incomparably blended.

This morning, however, it was but a transparent veil through which he gazed at the soul of the poet, and a great pity filled him for the winged thought that must ever stoop in its flight to the plodding ear of material sense. He saw how impossible it was to express a tithe of what the poet had

felt; to shadow forth, even vaguely, the Titanic drama of the spirit upon which no eye may look; saw as never before the utter inadequacy of this feeble medium through which the soul upon the outposts of materiality must shout its message from the gods.

Yet, how impossible it was to maintain silence, to pass by on the other side. They had all stooped, had all shouted, since Plato first called in mystic language to the careless, light-heart Greek; since Christ from the Mount of Olives preached the gospel of peace to the scoffing Pharisee. Even those who had professed a contempt for the dull ears which, hearing, heard not, had, by their continuous appeal to the multitude, belied the boast; and here was Shelley who, more than any other, had soared above the heads of the herd, calling with all his soul in the cry. He thought it strange that the poem had never appeared to him in this light before, often as he had read it, and now that he did see it thus,

it weighed him to earth. He was filled with a deep despair for this supremacy that was not sufficient unto itself.

In his present mood, this effort of the chosen to draw all men unto them was belittling. He tossed the book aside with a gesture of impatience and began to walk the floor. How utterly futile was it for the spark, divine though it were, which could burn here but a moment, to attempt to ignite the sodden humanity by which it was surrounded! Yet, he assured himself, that if one being could be found in all the world who had hailed any work of his with the elation of spirit he had experienced in poring over his own favorites, he would be content; would be repaid for all he had suffered, all he had missed.

It was a great misfortune, he thought, that the writer could never know whether such appreciation existed. Shut in, as he was, by silence and space, there was no means of reaching the kindred soul, and of what avail was the tardy recognition of pos-

terity? What did it matter to Shelley that he had read "Epipsychedion" with beating heart? To Chopin that he had been deeply stirred by his music? The one had been ground in the mortar of prejudice; the other had slowly frozen in sight of those whose love might have warmed him into life. What matter that their subtle arrows had at last penetrated that egregious pachyderm, the world? The spark was out, and the altars before which these belated worshipers poured their libations were cold. Would it be so with him, or would he sink into that oblivion, unbroken even by the fitful aftergleam of recognition that had been the part of many another equally worthy?

He picked up a small, thin volume upon the title page of which his own name figured, read a line or two and threw it aside in disgust. The most terrible ordeal was the moment in which he doubted his own power. There were times when his settled pessimism was tinged with a bitter

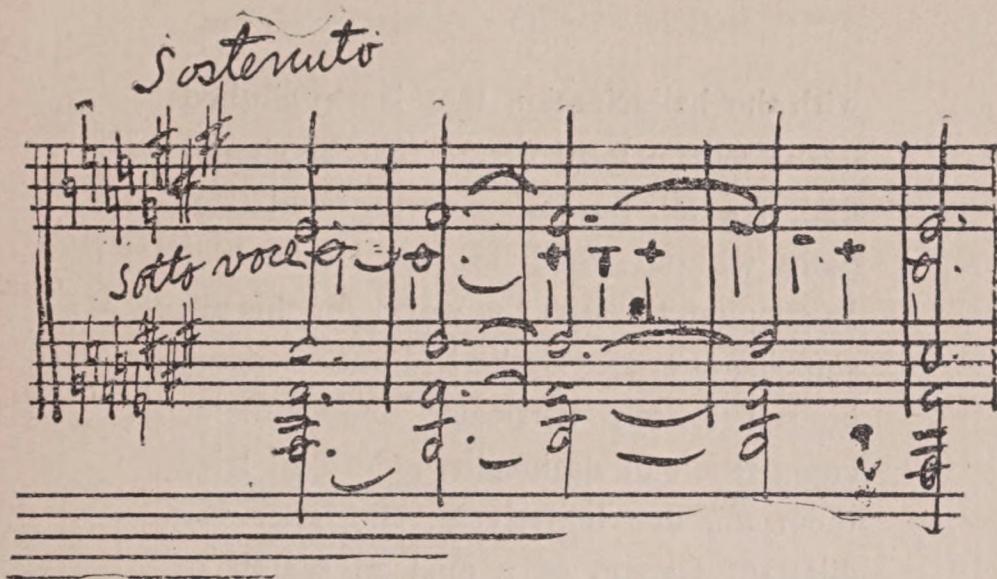
derision of himself; when the inconsistency of his position came home to him with terrific force. If the plaudits of the mob were what he wanted, why had he not been content to seek them through the channels that were open to him. He knew, had always known, that there were avenues of success along which he might have passed easily to wealth and popularity, could he only have condescended to them.

Why had he not pursued his phantom along the open highway; called to his fellow creatures in the blatant language that all must hear and many might understand, instead of squandering a fortune and wasting his vitality in the pursuit of a chimera? Why had he persisted in irrigating a sterile tract with the best that was in him? Even now, it was possible to retrieve something of the loss if he could but bring himself to grinding out the pattering melodies that were the delight of the mob. But no, he could not walk that way, though in the opposite direction lay oblivion, even starvation.

Yet, what a miserable mask was this he wore. He had accepted defeat with outward calm, but within all was tumult. The placid front he presented to the world covered the haggard visage of thwarted aspiration which, though crucified, was aspiration still. Abroad the fancy had came to him that he must find relief in that lazy old town dozing away the centuries under a friendly sky ; that, if he but returned, its somnolent atmosphere must exorcise the devil of unrest that possessed him ; but even here he was doomed to disappointment.

He sat down by the window, laid his head against the tufted back of the chair and closed his eyes. Before his inner sense there floated, to the movement of a delicious melody, a fragile, buoyant figure, whose luminous eyes sought his own with a tender and joyous sympathy, which said :

“ It is nothing, this dullness of the world.”



“What reed was that on which I leant?
Ah, backward fancy, wherefore wake
The old bitterness again, and break
The low beginnings of content?”

If there was one thing to which Felix had reason to believe himself impervious it was that insidious, master passion, that madness of the race to which we all succumb at least once—some of us many times. He had won this immunity by many and varied experiences; varied as to their causes and development, but uniform as to their results. He had set out in life

with the hallucination that it was clothed in the female form divine that he should find, if at all, the responsiveness and sympathy without which life was intolerable. In groping through the world for this all-sufficing appreciation he had not restricted himself to any particular temperament, complexion or nationality; he had tried them all, not tentatively, and after the dilettant fashion of a man in search of amusement; but with the intense earnestness of one who feels that he carries with him but half the equipment of life and passionately desires to find the other half.

He had loved not once but many times, and he was prepared to maintain that of all the hallucinations of men, (of all the aberrations of genius, the chimeras of mediocrity, the woman we love is the most elusive and disappointing.) He had found that external beauty, upon which the eye rests with such exquisite satisfaction, gives forth an empty echo when sounded for the qualities of soul which alone could give it

lasting fascination. Where he had looked for deep, sequestered wells of sympathy, he had found the babbling shallows of an impoverished being beating itself into spray against trifles. The best of them were but echoes of himself; could but wait for their cue as a dog waits for the stick in the hand of its master that it is presently to fetch from the stream with much wagging of the tail and eyes beseeching applause.

Those who had some intellectual depth were narrow and egotistical to the point of self-worship. At first they had seemed otherwise, but they had only "played the slave to gain the tyranny," and he had come to dread them more than the shallow ones.

Thus he felt himself in a measure inoculated against the malady that had so often conquered him. He could never again seek that actual possession through which, in his youth, he had hoped to gain everything. He might still nurse the hallucina-

tion, but he could never again put it to the cruel test of possession. He was like a boy who could amuse himself with blowing bubbles, but had learned long ago that it was not safe to take them in his hand. He asserted and reasserted all this to himself, as often as on closing his eyes he was confronted by a certain buoyant apparition, floating upon the rhythm of a familiar melody. He remembered distinctly just how she came into his consciousness with the first four bars of that melody in G-flat major; how she had approached him with the crescendo, and how she had turned the corner just as the pianist struck the muffled triplets that marked the return of the minor motive. She would always be inseparably associated with that melody in his mind. He had only to hum it, to strike it on the piano, to bring her before him just as she looked when she passed him with that kindling expression in her blue eyes; but he had a still more singular experience in connection with that strain,

Her approach or proximity on the street (he never saw her anywhere else) was invariably heralded by the flashing of some part of it through his mind. If he felt tempted to hum it, he instinctively looked up and down the street, confidently expecting to see her, and she was always there.

But while he indulged freely in these airy fancies, he was never moved by an impulse to seek her out, to know more of her than that joyous look with which she had greeted him upon their first meeting, and that swift, undulating movement that had borne her along under the sharply etched shadows of the trees.

It was several weeks later that, wandering aimlessly about the town, as was his wont, he found himself in a quiet street remote from the din of traffic, and, turning a corner, came suddenly upon an old-fashioned garden flaunting its gay colors beside a porch supported by large, fluted

columns, according to a style of architecture no longer in vogue in the place.

On either side of the square main building were long, low rooms spread out like wings, and beneath the wide, low windows were beds of mignonette and all the sweet old herbs that had filled the world of his childhood with fragrance.

He stopped a moment to bask in the memories borne to him on their strong perfume and to drink in the delicious atmosphere of tranquillity and unworldliness that pervaded the place. A corner of that mantle of peace seemed to fall upon him as he stood there, screened by a friendly shrub, looking into that dim interior which was so dark and cool and serene, for a sudden surcease of his own ache came to him ; the futility of desire, of struggle, became too grotesque even for regret, contemplated in that spot. He could well believe that the fortunate beings who inhabited that undisturbed seclusion were in the world but not of it ; that they had seldom,

if ever, ventured beyond its cloudless horizon; otherwise some hint of the restlessness of the scrambling herd, some touch of the world's fever that had burned so long in his own veins, must be there to tell the story.

From somewhere in the shadowy interior came the sound of a violin trying that melody from the scherzo; tentatively and timidly at first, then more boldly, then with a fine, strong vibrant tone. So intimately was She connected with that strain that before he had time to think what it might mean, he had swung round upon his heel and searched the street in all directions. Then the truth came to him—she lived there of course. He thought it singular that that fact should not have burst upon him instantly. The house stood well back in the yard, and was surrounded by a wilderness of shrubbery, so that he could pace the pavement securely screened from view; and as the instrument continued to sing the melody over and over, he walked

up and down humming it softly. Then he bethought him of the windows in the side of the house that opened toward the street and turned the corner again in the hope of catching a glimpse of her.

It was a warm day in early summer and the windows were all open, but he saw no one. He was none the less confident that she lived there, and he stood waiting in the warm, odorous air. Presently the sound of the violin ceased and a shadow swept by one of the windows whose drapery was lightly stirred by the breeze; a shadow with a flowing rhythmic movement, and then a face appeared at the window just opposite him; that face whose expression of serene joyousness had said to him so plainly:

“It is nothing, this dullness of the world.”

She did not look up and down the street in uncertain quest as he had done, but straight at the lilac bush behind which he stood, and as he stepped clear of it their

eyes met. The look was all. In the presence of that perfect understanding the conventional symbols of deference seemed petty. He was not moved to grimace or gesture; to bow, raise his hat, or speak. There was no surprise in her face or manner; she had come to the window expecting him; she had felt his presence as he had divined hers, and it gave him joy to think that perhaps his own restless, bitter heart, so far from the coveted path of peace, could by its nearness, impart a gladness to that soul which seemed to him to have scaled the heights of repose.

It was clear now that the feeling was mutual; yet there was no desire on the part of either to draw nearer. As soon as his eyes met hers he had moved away, and no look or gesture of hers had sought to detain him for a moment; but he knew that her eyes followed him as he walked on. He was filled with a delirious joy because she understood; because he felt that while she might expect him again in the

same way, she would never require of him the commonplace homage that all women exact of their lovers. So long as they did not touch hands or lips this illusion that he was nursing so tenderly was safe from rude blasts of discovery. He recognized the fact that such as she was, his ardent imagination made her; but he was deeply grateful to her that she, no more than himself, desired the disenchantment that is born of possession. She would never afflict him with that soul-sickness that comes of sounding for sympathy and finding the lead strike bottom before the line is half reeled off. Therein lay her superiority.

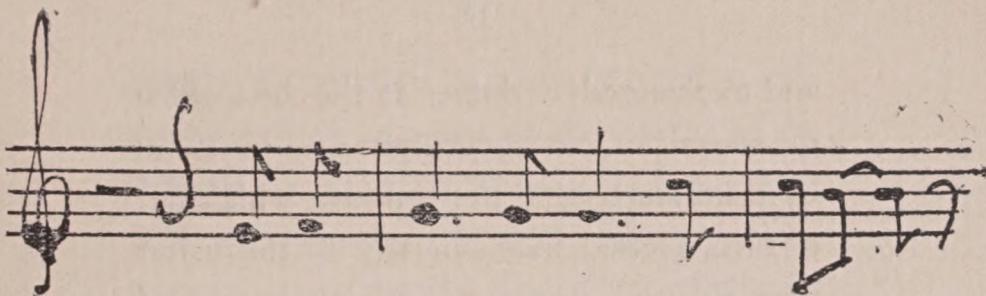
No, he did not wish to know her, but as he went on his way the deep, intense joy of her eyes went with him. It seemed to him that a whole life was concentrated in that look that mirrored the eternal now; a serene completeness that was without memory and without anticipation. They loved each other, and what need to rehearse

the divine truth in the pitiful, stammering tongue of humanity? What language could express that perfect understanding that was able to dispense with language? He was glad that he did not even know her name.

But while he had conquered curiosity to a certain point, he had not eliminated it, and he fell to wondering what knowledge she had of him, what circumstance of his past life had stirred her interest. Did she know him for the failure that he was in the eyes of the world, and pity him? No, there was no compassion in the look she had bent upon him. Did she know his story and believe him worthier than his fortune; or had she simply hung about him that drapery of romantic illusion with which he had invested so many of her sex? The question remained unanswered, and was food for vagrant fancy. He was never tempted to solve it in the only way in which it could have been solved. He never approached her openly, though he

sometimes permitted himself to walk near that window on still nights, in search of the tranquillity he could not find elsewhere; and he never walked there that he did not feel that presence on the other side, at whose approach the tumultuous billows of his being relapsed into strange calm.

But these intervals were brief and infrequent. At other times he was haunted by the gnawing discontent that had for years been his only companion, and he was often brought to curious experiences in the effort to escape from it.



“Was that the landmark? What—the foolish well
Whose wave, low down, I did not stoop to drink,
But sat and flung the pebbles from its brink
In sport to send its imaged skies pell-mell,
(And mine own image, had I noted well:)—
Was that my point of turning?——”

It was a sultry night in early autumn and, passing by a theatre, Felix was moved by a sudden impulse to go inside in search of relief from the thoughts that plagued him with such maddening persistence. Not that he expected to be amused, for the bill was posted at the door; but he thought the entertainment offered (it was a concert given by “local talent,” under the auspices of a charitable organization) might be bad enough to act as a counter-irritant.

With this belief, he went up the steps

and exchanged a dollar at the box-office for the bit of pasteboard put into his hand by the man behind the window, which he, in turn, passed mechanically to the usher who thrust a program into his hand and marshalled him down to an orchestra chair, immediately under the footlights. He protested, for he did not expect to remain until the concert was over, but the seat his coupon called for was the only one in the house not occupied and he was compelled to take it.

The theatre was filled with a close, suffocating atmosphere and a packed crowd that buzzed incessantly; a motley crowd drawn together by one of those ingenious devices of civilization by which the victim is first robbed and afterward tortured in the name of the brotherhood of man. Felix was no sooner seated in the heat and the noise than he bitterly repented his rashness. He did not look at his program, but hung it over his knee and leaned back in his chair, waiting for release with an as-

pect of resignation that might have moved a red Indian to pity, but could stir no compassion in these souls intent upon their travesty of the love of Christ. The curtain was already up, from which he hopefully inferred that the affair was at least under way.

He had been sitting for some time gazing vacantly into the scene, when his consciousness was invaded by a simpering face from between whose lips there issued an attenuated and uncertain melody that was not infrequently off the pitch. Then another presence, scarcely more palpable, flitted before him, singing in a thin soprano, "The Angel's Serenade" to a violin obligato that was persistently flat. Then a soprano of some local celebrity came out and sang the inevitable aria from Gounod's "Queen of Sheba," and being tempestuously encored, came again and sang the equally inevitable ballad by Meyer-Helmund.

Several minutes of silence and then a

white apparition floated down to the foot-lights and poised there like a bird ; a figure clad in fleecy drapery that dipped and swayed with every movement ; with long flowing sleeves that fell from the shoulders to the hem of her robe like furled wings ; and a pair of blue eyes, tender and radiant, that singled him out instantly from the crowd. The first sensation was a thrill of poignant apprehension. What was she doing there ? Why had she stepped down from the remote pedestal upon which he had placed her to shame him with such associations ? What sympathy could she possibly have with that absurd travesty upon the love of God ?

Felix looked at his program, and for the first time saw the name by which the world called her, and he was not reassured by the fact that she was about to sing the rondo of *Orpheus*, from Gluck's opera. He trembled inwardly for the result. He had heard so many women sing that air, and the majority of them had sung it so abom-

inably that it had become to him nothing more than a symbol of defeat. That she should attempt it was the last refinement of cruelty. She stood there looking at him with serene, joyous confidence, while he was wrung with a painful suspense lest this last ideal should, by some indiscretion of taste, some trespass against the unwritten laws of being, dissolve under his eyes. Somebody behind him buzzed the information that she was the contralto of Christ Church, which boasted the most fashionable congregation in town; then the accompanist struck two or three full chords by way of prelude, and the voice took up the recitative so tensely charged with woe.

She stood holding the music before her with both hands, but did not look at it. Her head was thrown back, her eyes raised, her face tranquil, passionless. He noted this with deep thankfulness. She would at least spare all grimace, all gesture. With that first "Ah, me," he gathered

courage. After the first phrase he trembled no more. He had heard opera in every musical center in Europe; he had heard every contralto of note who had appeared during his residence abroad, but he had never been so stirred by any human voice. He had heard voices of greater force and more perfect culture; her power lay in that native insight and sensitiveness to impressions that is the gift of God and quite beyond the province of culture to impart. She possessed in a rare degree the faculty of submitting passively to the transmission of ideas, of effacing self to the point of becoming the mouthpiece of the gods. "Truly," thought Felix, "except ye become as little children ye cannot enter the kingdom."

She finished the recitative with her head thrown back, her great, luminous eyes two points of divine radiance, gazing back at the heaven from which they had been temporarily banished (probably for a too keen sympathy with the woes of a fallen

race, Felix thought), then took up the air.

“Live without my Eurydice: Can I live without my love?” The two phrases in her throat became two perfect pictures. In the one was all the isolation and despair of the first great loss, touched with a curious wonder that such loss could be; all the fresh poignancy of a soul unfamiliar with the tragedy of mortality, coming face to face with the fact, yet holding a lingering doubt of its reality.

So full were these few notes of the strangeness of sorrow and the impatience of youth with the cruel companionship of misery, that they brought his former self vividly before him. He seemed to be standing on the threshold of experience, confronting his first doubt.

“Can I live without my Love?” The thing was impossible, and all the agony and desperation of the futile attempt to adjust life to the new conditions was condensed into those seven notes. That ex-

quisitely musical polysyllable no longer stood for one woman whose death had left one lover in the delirium of baffled desire. As she sang on, that wail of bereavement expanded into something impersonal, typical, voicing the despair of a race. It was the cry of a world sick unto death for the loss of that sweet, expectant enthusiasm that lay smoking on the altar of experience. All that knowledge had wrested from hope; all that separated buoyant youth from inanimate age was embodied in the name she sent echoing through the dark recesses of his being. There were tones in her voice that went through him like plowshares; all feeling, all expression were committed to that organ so full of sympathy and melting richness. There was no gesture, no facial distortion to help out the illusion; nothing in the setting to suggest that world of shadows, yet the pencil of Doré would have faltered at the scene those smoothly flowing tones conjured before him. How

small, how pitiful, seemed all the stage pictures he had ever seen when compared to that inner vision upon which they could act only as a blur. And those horrid, ape-like gestures and grimaces of the singers —those meaningless antics dignified in criticism as “dramatic expression.” How he loathed them!

It had been many years since he had been able to derive as much pleasure from an operatic performance as from an orchestra; and he considered a good instrument in the hands of a master far more satisfactory than the human voice; for, with the voice, one must take the human personality, so replete with antagonistic elements, through which the great “I” looms aggressively. We do not exact of a violin that it shall caper and make faces at us; yet it is none the less effective as a medium of interpretation. Why should the human instrument be compelled to distress us with those conventional contortions? She must feel all this, for out-

wardly she was the embodiment of repose. Her singing was as effortless as the sighing of an *Æolian* harp. She was content to stand there passive, rapt, while the souls of all who had suffered, from Orpheus to Gluck, breathed through her in celestial cadences.

He had never heard anything more despairing, more tragic, than the finale of the rondo in which the cumulative grief of the recitative and the air seemed to gather and burst upon that sustained F that was like the last passionate cry of desire eternally baffled, eternally unsubdued.

It was over, and the audience was clapping frantically, just as it had clapped for each and all of the other singers; no more, no less, and the two women behind him began to buzz again. He had gathered from fragments of their conversation earlier in the evening that they were singers themselves, and he was not surprised to hear one of them say;

"I don't like her singing; she's too cold."

"She never did have any more animation than an oyster," replied the other. "Church music is her specialty; I don't see why she ever attempts to sing in concert or opera. But, then, there are some people who never admit their limitations."

"I don't understand this sort of thing in a person who has had her advantages," continued the first. "You know she studied in Europe."

In his inmost being Felix knew them to be a pair of feeble-minded persons who should be in charge of the State, but nevertheless the glory of the vision was dashed by their miserable caviling. By this time the continued applause had brought her to the front again, where she bowed and retired. He was glad she did not intend to sing again, for he did not see what she could sing after that. It would be torture to hear her descend to some trivial ballad to satisfy the popular demand,

But the mob was insatiable, and went on with the clapping that grew louder and louder as the probability of being balked of its whim increased. The people stamped and whistled and beat the floor with sticks, not on account of superior discernment or out of compliment to the artist, but because they had been inveigled into coming there and were determined to have the worth of their money.

She came out a third time, those transparent wings floating behind her as she moved; came down to the footlights and paused, with her head up. Felix quaked anew. What could she give them that would not seem sacrilege after that splendid realization? He longed to escape before the catastrophe; to get out of the house by an aperture, however small, and half rose from his seat, but her eyes were upon him, and he sat down again. The accompanist was already playing the prelude, which was singularly familiar. He was trying to think where he had heard it,

but before he could place it, she had begun to sing, and he recognized it as a ballad of his own, written long ago, in that fair time of youth that counted all things possible. It came to him now like the voice of one long dead, and it rang in his heart like a pæan of victory.

The song had never been published, so far as he knew. He had given the manuscript to a friend just before going away, and had never thought of it since. It differed from most things he had written in its joyous expression of belief in a final triumph, and it followed the wail of Orpheus with a deeply satisfying fitness. He was now far enough removed from the time of its composition to judge of it dispassionately, and he unhesitatingly pronounced it good. It moved upon the dark waters of his being like the spirit of infinite peace, and a hope breathed faintly within him—the hope that even now it might not be all too late for achievement. She had brought the past back to him so vividly

that he could see just where, in his impatience and bitterness, he had tangled the threads of destiny, but there was yet time to undo the work of desperation.

He did not wait for the next number, but hastened out into the night to commune with this new hope. The night was the cooler, the more serene, for that hour spent within, and as he went down the street a fragment of one of Rossetti's sonnets sang itself in his brain :

“O what from thee the grace, to me the prize,
And what to Love the glory,—when the whole
Of the deep stair thou tread’st to the dim shoal
And weary water of the place of sighs,
And there dost work deliverance, as thine eyes
Draw up my prisoned spirit to thy soul.”



“ Why linger, why turn back, why shrink, my
heart?

Thy hopes are gone before ; from all things here
They have departed ; thou shouldst now depart.
All light is past from the revolving year,
And man and woman ; and what still is dear
Attracts to crush, repels to make thee wither.”

It was a heavy, dull, November morn-
ing, but before Felix drew aside the cur-
tains that shut him from the dreary pros-
pect without, he was weighed down by
an intolerable depression. He waked with
it, and it had been growing steadily ever

since he opened his eyes. There was no reason for it, but it was not the less oppressive because of its remote and intangible source. It was his first experience of the kind and it annoyed him unspeakably.

He had been for years the victim of a settled discontent, but that grew logically out of his disappointment and was as rational as it was all-embracing. This sudden accession of nameless misery was altogether different. He concluded at last that it must be malaria; the place was full of it, and he had been away so long that he would probably have to go through the process of acclimatization. He would get some breakfast and go and see a doctor. But was it worth while to get breakfast? What a disgusting thing it was to be the slave of a set of digestive organs; to be compelled to go and sit in the midst of a crowd of chattering apes three times a day only for the purpose of feeding a machine that accomplished nothing.

He stood, holding aside the drapery of

the window, looking moodily and irresolutely out upon the dismal prospect, the leaden sky, the oozing trees, the dripping pedestrians, chasing each other beneath his window, hurrying after they knew not what, and every sight and sound that met him intensified the depression that had already become panic, when a single, deep, solemn note broke through the din of traffic and the deafening roar of the electric car. Felix started violently, left the window and began to walk up and down the floor in a frenzy of agitation that was altogether inexplicable. There came a second note, ponderous, dreadful, that set every nerve in his body quivering. It was a church bell, tolling for the dead, and, in spite of the fact that there was not a being in the town whose death could make the slightest difference to him, its effect upon him was that of the knell of his last hope. Even as he smiled at the irrational behavior of his nerves, there came a third stroke that made him feel as if he must

shriek aloud. He snatched up his hat and hurried out.

In the street he felt more at ease, though the air was dense and the firmament seemed but an indefinite continuation of the canopy of dun vapor that hung over the town. The dreadful tolling followed him; he could not get rid of that, go where he would. He dawdled over his breakfast as long as possible, but all through the dreary meal he heard the deep boom of the bell. The day was before him, destitute of incentive or reason for being, a monotonous waste, the very contemplation of which filled him with weariness. When he had finished his breakfast, he went and got a prescription and came away somewhat soothed by the doctor's assurance that he had malaria. It was some satisfaction to know that it was nothing worse.

He disposed of twenty minutes at a drug-store, waiting for the clerk to fill a dozen capsules with quinine, and then, for lack of anything better to do, walked about the

streets in a fine, raw drizzle whose chill penetrated to his very marrow. More than once he thought it might be wiser to go back to the shelter of his room, but he kept on walking, whistling softly as a charm against the spell that had settled down upon him. Presently, he found himself whistling a bar of the scherzo, and, as though it had imparted a sudden incentive, he turned a corner and quickened his pace.

A brisk walk of three minutes brought him to the quaint old house which had this morning a peculiar aspect of desolation on account of its bare shrubs, each dripping like a mop. It was the first time he had seen it in this condition. Only a week before he had been there, but then the place and all about it was ablaze with the final glory of autumn and bathed in the glow of a magnificent sunset. One week of cold, autumnal rain had wrought an indescribable transformation, the sight of which only deepened his dejection and made him wish he had not ventured near

it. He went on round toward the front of the house, where some bedraggled chrysanthemums were beating their heads against the wall and the air was full of that lingering damp smell of the few sweet herbs that had successfully defied the frost. He stopped before the gate and stood looking at the door about which there seemed to be something unusual, but it was some time before the unaccustomed feature resolved itself into a streamer of crepe and a wreath of white hyacinths. Then he knew that She was dead. There were others living there ; he had seen them going in and out often, when lingering near the spot, but he never for a moment thought of connecting this badge of death with any of them. He turned away from the house as from a place that was cold and empty and henceforth bare of interest.

He had never sought to know her intimately, yet he had always thought of her as something belonging exclusively to himself, the more exclusively his, in that he

did not feel the need of absolute possession. Because she had not roused in him that clamor of the senses he had always experienced in the presence of other women who pleased him, he had foolishly dreamed that nothing could effect the close sympathy, at once intimate and exclusive, which existed quite independent of association.

For anything he knew to the contrary, she might have been married; he could even fancy her thus without a pang. But death—he had never thought of that. How was it possible for a feeling so intangible as theirs had been to leave such a palpable bereavement behind it? A weight of woe so appalling that, for the moment, life seemed insupportable? As he moved away from the spot where he had been wont to come and bathe his spirit in a deep, recuperative calm, when the world swarmed with irritations and “the stings of human neighborhood envenomed all,” it seemed to him that the light had suddenly faded from

earth and sky ; that because She was not, there never could be another summer, another perfume, another night in which the moon would rise serene. That leaden canopy was no longer a vapor, but a pall that came nearer and nearer to him as he went on his way, and there was such a weight upon his breast that he felt like a man struggling beneath a burden.

He began to inquire of himself with curious self-torture whether he had not missed in her the only real opportunity of his life. Whether it were not given to every man to find at least once that perfect unison, without which life is one long bitterness. Could it be that, in the abject fear of further disappointment, he had turned away from the happiness knocking at his heart ? The longer he entertained the thought, the deeper the fangs of doubt struck into him, until doubt changed to conviction, and he was filled with frantic desperation by the mere contemplation of the delight that had escaped him.

As the weeks dragged by, there was added to the old discontent a morbid disgust of life and everything pertaining to it ; a disgust that was the deeper, the more insupportable, for the brief respite he had enjoyed. Immediately following that experience in the theatre there had been a return of something like the old enthusiasm, when he felt almost equal to going back to seek anew the goal he once feared he had missed forever. The idea had come to him that it might, after all, have been his own obstinacy that stood in his way. He had taken a certain pride in being in advance of his age ; in addressing himself to the few rather than to the many. He had insisted that the mountain should come to Mahomet. He knew that all great souls had stooped to the clods about them ; and what, if after all, this were not the noble condescension he had been disposed to consider it, but a necessity of being ? What if mankind, for all the difference we are pleased to fancy as existing, were but one

flesh, and this yearning of the strong over the weak but the lament of the body for a maimed member. Perhaps he had been too impatient of this clog, and the scorn he had flung abroad was returning to him a thousandfold.

In the first glow of this new perception he had thought he could go back ; had even made some desultory beginning in that direction ; but the unwonted impetus was spent, the hope that had sprung up in him at the sound of her voice had died with her, and strive as he might, he could not revive it. He had no longer a desire to retrieve the past, admitting that it were possible. The futility of effort, of achievement even, crushed him. Therein lay the sting of being, of doing. When all was done, had anything really been accomplished?

The petty annoyances of every-day life grated upon him as never before. There were moments when the "mortal coil" chased him at every point ; when the de-

sire to escape from it was inappeasable. He had never been over fond of his life, or of the world in which it must be lived; but his attitude hitherto had been that of a well founded but governable distaste. He had been willing to sit out the play, though it were but a miserable farce. Even this complaisance had departed. Life was not more oppressive, not more destitute of interest than before. The situation was precisely what it had been for the last ten years, with this difference, that endurance was spent. His material existence had become a prison from which escape at any cost was the ever-present necessity.

Spring came again, and through the lengthening, enervating days, devoid of interest or occupation, Felix sat at his window watching the stream of humanity as it ebbed and flowed beneath; contemplating sometimes with pitying curiosity, but oftener with petulant contempt, the singular beings who were willing to delve for the mere privilege of drawing breath. Life

had so little to offer when its terms were easiest, that he could not fathom the philosophy of a man who was willing to purchase its scant favors with unceasing toil. Sometimes he wondered whether the fascination were not in the struggle itself, whose all-absorbing intensity drew attention from the cheapness of the prize; sometimes he envied them because they were too busy to make the acquaintance of themselves and their species, and so escaped the disgust that treads hard upon the heels of knowledge. Occasionally he entertained the idea of engaging in some occupation, if only as a means of relief from the treadmill of thought in which he labored incessantly, but out of unconquerable listlessness, he dismissed it as it came.

He gradually became imbued with a deep-seated contempt for himself because he continued to "lag superfluous" in a scene upon which he was unable to make even the feeblest impression, in which he no longer felt the faintest ripple of interest,

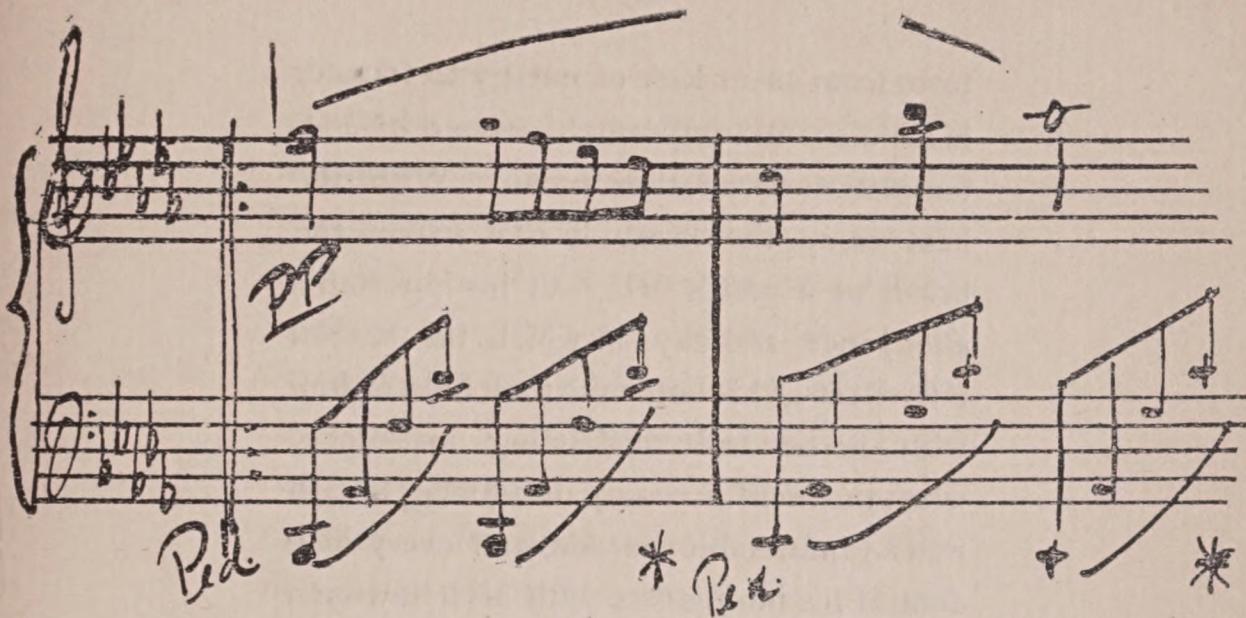
Surely it should be permissible for a man to steal away quietly between the acts when the farce becomes unbearable. He was no longer an actor, only a spectator, whose absence of interest deprived him of a reason for being. Why did he not withdraw?

Why was it that the man who stole away, however discreetly, before the end of the interminable, insipid play was invariably branded "lunatic?" Why, indeed, save that he was the only sane person in a community of incurable bedlamites? When a man, finding himself walled up in prison, escapes by any means, however desperate, the action is considered rational at least. The mere man, whose life is worth so little anywhere, and may be as profitably spent in durance as elsewhere, may regain his liberty if he can; but the soul, caught in an ill-starred moment in this noisome dungeon of the world, must bide its time in bitterness.

The worst was that he knew these rumi-

nations for the miserable platitudes they were. They were not even his own. They had been in turn the worthless property of every man who had had the courage to think since the world began. His problem was as old as the race; the arguments pro and con were as old as the problem, and just as inconclusive as they were in the day when the first reasoning atom discovered the grotesque impossibility of its position, and began to search the labyrinth of its consciousness for the way out. No doubt the master argument after all was that same old lurking horror of the unknown; that sleepless, grinning superstition that stood guard over the only door of egress.

He assured himself that he had long since ceased to care what men might say of him when he was under ground, yet he lingered; lingered like a guest whose welcome is far spent, who sits by the inn fire from sheer lack of resolution to draw his cloak about him and step into the chill and the darkness without.



“(To one it is ten years of years,
* * * Yet now and in this place,
Surely she leaned o'er me—her hair
Fell all about my face ; * * * *
Nothing : The autumn fall of leaves
The whole year sets apace.)”

Spring went and the sweltering heat of a southern summer settled down upon the place over which there hung a quivering vapor, and the hot air rose from the streets as from a blast furnace. Felix, whose habit had been to migrate, remained in

town from sheer lack of energy to transfer his endless and unprofitable round of contemplation to another scene. With the heat came the lassitude that makes the brush of a gnat's wing an insupportable annoyance, and days in which the hateful influences of his outer life took hold of him with fierce and maddening insistence, when the mere necessity of drawing breath was an intolerable burden, and every incident of his intercourse with his fellow-men was a scorpion's sting.

There were days when he was able to withdraw in impenetrable abstraction from the world about him, when he was as unconscious of the dust and heat and din of the streets as of that unceasing tramp, tramp beneath his window—that endless procession of egregious phantoms tending toward a point that had no existence; days when he was absorbed by the memory of her, when the feeling that he had let the one opportunity of his life go by him, seized upon him with strenuous, irresistible

bitterness ; long days and longer nights in which no sleep came to him, when he dwelt apart with the shadow of irreclaimable loss ; when the crushing disenchantment of his youth was as nothing to the haunting mockery of this possibility forever past. Then the solid foundation of materialism upon which he had planted himself, in the hope that there was at least an end of controversy in negation, heaved beneath him for very longing that the mystery of the unapparent might hold some unguessed beatitude, upon whose final note of realization, the discord of unfulfilled desire would be resolved.

Surely, he thought, this dominant, vital essence must have strayed from some more congenial habitation, else why this unceasing ferment of impatience ? We can not long with all the heart for that of which we have no knowledge, and what is this invincible discontent but the memory of a happier existence ? What this longing to escape but the intuition that, upon the

border of this far country in which we feed on husks, lies our Father's house and the endless festival of the soul's home-coming?

For days together he searched the abyss of consciousness, to be answered only by the maddening silence of the eternal mystery. Then he would turn upon himself in bitter mockery of the longing that had bred the hope; in disgust for the human weakness that could return to those ghastly, world-worn speculations that had made of life an acrid riddle since the first man entered upon his dismal heritage of knowledge. What advantage did he enjoy over that thoughtless, moiling multitude beneath his window? Day after day he sat there distilling upon them all the scorn of a bitter philosophy, yet what was he doing more than they? He had merely transferred the quest to a different plane. And he could not even be sure that his plane was the more exalted.

At times the noise and din of the streets

became unbearable, and even the people he did not know where hateful in his sight. Their faces looked like hideous masks ; their physical blemishes angered him ; a nose that was too long, a mouth that was too large, any freakish irregularity of nature irritated him like a personal affront. Then he fled from the swarming humanity about him as from a plague ; rushed breathlessly from the maddening roar of its pursuits as from a beast of prey whose jaws gaped for his life.

At the distance of an hour's ride from the heart of the town was the reservoir, a cool, quiet spot—a shadowy expanse of water hemmed in by green fields, reflecting the infinite blue. Leading from the door of the tower, and separating the two basins of the reservoir, was a long flagged walk, protected by a low stone balustrade which afforded a peaceful promenade, remote from the influences he loathed. When he was tired of walking there was an iron seat near the tower door where he

could sit for hours, in the shadow, with a book before him, undisturbed by any human presence; with nothing to remind him of the insane and profitless bustle of the town behind him. He could hear the songs of the birds in the woods near by, the wood that was so soft and restful to the eye after the pitiless glare of the streets; the rhythmic whetting of the scythe where the negroes were mowing the slope of the embankment, and snatches of the melodies they sang were borne to him by the fresh, invigorating air that seemed to purify him as it passed over him.

Here the devil of disgust passed out of him, and the fascination of the place grew upon him so that he went every afternoon to sit in the shadow of the tower, in the silence broken only by the swish and gurgle of the water beating through the filters, and the occasional footfall of the watchman, who nodded in a friendly way as he passed, but never spoke, except at

six o'clock to remind his visitor that it was time to lock the gate.

He liked to sit close to the water and think that there was only the low stone balustrade between him and the unbroken rest it held, until an unwonted quiet came to him, a quiet that was less like peace than a numbness of the senses.

Here he watched the panorama of the days; the fields changing from green to gold, from gold to brown and back to green again, as the young grain began to grow; and, framed in the doorway of the tower, saw marvelous sunsets when the great burning sphere drooped low, swinging like a buoyant globe of fire above the purple billows of the Indiana hills.

Then came the slow change, from the fierce heat of August to the balmy, aromatic days of Indian Summer, when the trees dropped their dusky uniform and donned the brilliant colors, the motley gold and red of the carnival. The woods, the fields, the sky changed from day to day,

but that smooth expanse of water remained always the same; all a-quiver with radiant ripples in the sunlight, so deep and still and mysterious, there in the shadow of the tower.

One afternoon he came to his favorite seat with a deepened sadness borne in upon him by the knowledge that the season was near its close; that in a week he might expect the dismal, continuous rains, the bitter, biting blast that would strip the woods and leave all gray and bleak again. As yet, there was no hint of storm in the still, sweet air full of the scent of dried grass and leaves, and vocal with the call of partridges in the distant meadow. He leaned over the stone balustrade and dipped his hand in the water so cool and still, while he waited for the resignation that always came to him here. To-day it was far to seek.

He had, as usual, brought a book with him; had picked it up as he left the room without looking at it. Now he opened it

and saw that it was a volume of Rossetti's poems. Was it merely a coincidence that his eyes rested on a line of "The Blessed Damozel," "I wish that he were come to me"? He turned back and read the whole poem, then closed the book and sat listening to the subdued sounds about him, the voices of the mowers on the slope, the call of the partridge in the meadow, the distant clanging of a cow-bell, the far-off bark of a dog, and the cries of some children at play coming very faintly across the fields, and the slow beat of the machinery throbbing in that mysterious region under the tower. The sun dropped low, throwing a shaft of crimson light through the tower door and along the flagged walk, down which the watchman came, nodding familiarly as he passed. Felix leaned over the balustrade looking down into the water, which seemed to draw him with a strenuous spell. He bent lower, lower still, and was presently seized with a sud-

den impulse to cast himself into that still depth; an impulse so imperious that it seemed for a moment as if he had obeyed it.

He had often been moved by the same impulse when looking down from a great height, and it was always followed by the indescribable sensation of dropping through space with stunning velocity. And now, with this irrational desire to throw himself into the water, came the imaginary sensation of drowning as vivid as any reality could have been. He could feel the gurgle of the water in his ears, the suffocation, the soft lapping of the fluent element about his limbs. He felt as if he had been suddenly separated into two beings; the one struggling there in the water, and sinking finally with a low gurgle; the other leaning over the wall, looking on with dispassionate curiosity.

He could see the widening circle of the wave above the spot where the apparition disappeared, sweep outward until it broke

against the rim of the basin, and then there came to him a sudden sense of relief, of escape. There was an unwonted lightness in all his limbs, and with it came an exaltation of spirit that amounted to ecstasy. The air was full of music; not bird notes and the low songs of the mowers, but ethereal harmonies that vibrated through him, without that element of pain that makes of earthly music a "thing wherein we feel there is some hidden want." Through it all, like a half-effaced memory, played that melody from the scherzo that was inseparably associated with her.

He knew she was dead, yet he felt that she must be near, and as he turned his head he saw her coming down the walk where a moment before he had seen the commonplace figure of the watchman; coming toward him with open arms, in that white, floating drapery she had worn when last he saw her, the failing radiance

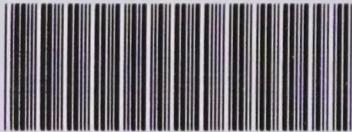
of the sun upon her face, the unimagined glory of her hair streaming round her, and in her eyes that glad look of recognition he knew so well. The look of one who had waited long for some dear realization. Now he knew why the old life had been unbearable. He had not been alone in that longing to cross the boundaries of sense. She had shared it, and the magic of that all-compelling expectancy, whose spell he had felt but could not understand, had lured him hither. The past was but an uneasy dream ; the old bitterness but a speck in a dissolving mist ; the aching discord he had known but the modulation through which life had passed from the vague and indeterminate key of mortal longing to the joyous pæan of infinite realization. That old impatience for achievement was nothing but the nightmare of a personal egotism from which he had been awakened by the all-potent touch of love.

He rose and would have gone toward

her but for some restraining touch upon his shoulder; a touch that was like a lingering shackle of his old adversary, the Flesh. He brushed it impatiently aside, but the same movement effaced the vision. It was the watchman's hand upon his shoulder and he brought the tiresome information that it was time to lock the gate. This meant that it was time for Felix to return to town, but he could not even look at that spot between him and the sunset over which there hovered a dense, leaden canopy. He waited until the watchman had passed inside, then he stood for a moment with his hat in his hand, wondering what he should do with it. The hat would float and it would betray him. He looked about him for an instant, helplessly, then crushed it into a shapeless mass and flung it far out upon the water, and, laying a hand upon the balustrade, let himself noiselessly down into the still depth that promised so much.

The watchman, who had been waiting for Felix to pass through the gate, grew impatient and came to look for him. There was no one on the seat by the tower door, and nothing to be seen save a widening ripple that presently broke, sparkling at the rim of the basin.

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